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AUTHOR	Silverman, Linda Kreger
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ABSTRACT

This very brief paper considers the importance of positive social development for gifted children. It stresses the need for these children to interact with true peers, that is others with whom they can interact at an equal level around issues of common interest. Development of leadership skills and self-esteem is seen to be fostered by relationships with true peers, such as students find in special programs for gifted students. Some books are suggested to help the social development of gifted students. (DB)

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Promoting Positive Social Development*

Linda Kreger Silverman, Ph.D.
Gifted Development Center
1452 Marion Street
Denver, Colorado 80218

It has been apparent ever since gifted children were first studied that they tend to select friends who are their mental age rather than their chronological age (Gross, 1989; Hollingworth, 1931; Mann, 1957; O'Shea, 1960; N. Robinson & Noble, 1991; Terman, 1925). Roedell (1985) found that gifted children develop social skills more easily when they have the opportunity to interact with true peers.

> The term "peer" does not, in essence, mean people of the same age, but refers to individuals who can interact at an equal level around issues of common interest... The more highly gifted a child, the less likely that child is to find developmentally defined, true peers among age-mates...
>
> For children whose development is highly uneven, true peers may vary depending on the activity. A child with extraordinary intellectual but average physical skills might have one set of peers for reading and discussing books and another set for riding tricycles and playing tag...
>
> Special efforts are needed to help gifted children find companions with similar interests and abilities. Without such efforts, gifted children run the risk of being labeled different and strange by their age-mates. They may internalize these labels and become socially alienated at an early age (Whitmore, 1980)... Gifted children can learn the skills necessary to interact successfully with many different types of children.
>
> There is no substitute, however, for the social and cognitive growth that occurs through the interaction of peers of similar developmental stages. (p. 8)

With true peers, gifted children can be themselves, laugh at the same jokes, play games at the same level, share the depth of their sensitivity and develop more complex values. There is more opportunity for give and take in relationships on an equal basis. And through interaction with others with similar capabilities, they quickly learn that they cannot be the best at everything or always have their own way. Boys and girls alike are happier and better adjusted when they have opportunities to relate to other gifted children.

According to a series of older studies, children choose leaders who are slightly above the average intelligence of their group (Finch & Carroll, 1932; Hollingworth, 1926; McCuen,

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1929; Pasternak & Silvey, 1969; Warner, 1923). If there is too great a discrepancy between the intelligence of the group and the intellectual level of the child, communication will pose a major barrier (Stogdill, 1974). Therefore, leadership, too, develops best in gifted students when they are placed with other students of comparable ability.

Many researchers have found that gifted students enrolled in special programs experience enhanced self-esteem (Coleman & Fults, 1982; Feldhusen, Sayler, Nielsen, & Kolloff, 1990; Karnes & Wherry, 1981; Kolloff & Feldhusen, 1984; Maddux, Scheiber & Bass, 1982), primarily because of the opportunities these special classes provide for social interaction with true peers. The benefits of summer programs for the gifted have been well documented also (Higham & Buescher, 1987; Kolloff & Moore, 1989; Olszewski-Kubilius, 1989; VanTassel-Baska, Landau & Olszewski, 1984), with some unexpected bonuses.

> Systematic studies at the larger regional university programs have reported significant gains in academic performance and skill competence, strengthened self-esteem and self-image...
>
> More interesting in some ways than these measured gains are the unanticipated benefits specialized summer programs appear to induce. Parents, in particular, and secondary school teachers as well, comment in letters, telephone conversations, and direct contacts with program directors across the country about startling changes occurring with an adolescent son or daughter... changes in responsible behavior, self-discipline, confidence in challenging or stressful situations, and willingness to seek out opportunities that stretch and mold identified talents... Some teenagers, for example, report that for the first time in years they were able to meet, enjoy, and interact deeply with a peer. (Buescher, 1989, p. 17)

The best news is that there is a ripple effect from these positive social experiences: "many adolescents report that the 'effect' carries over to their regular schools when they return home; they are able to feel comfortable and socially adept in a peer group which is more diversely composed" (Higham & Buescher, 1987, p. 88).

When a solid base of self-esteem is developed in early childhood, gifted students are better equipped to branch out and make friends with others who are unlike themselves. Adolescence is developmentally the most appropriate stage for these widening horizons of social interaction. Gifted adolescents select their closest friends from among their mental peers, but they can also participate in team sports, band, extra-curricular clubs, church and community activities, and social events in which they have opportunities to interact with students who have a wide range of abilities. With a support system of gifted friends and classmates, they can join in other groups without fear of rejection, and they are more likely to gain respect and assume leadership positions.

Materials to Enhance Social Development

To relate effectively with others requires self-knowledge. Only in recent years have books become available to help these students understand their giftedness. The following books will be helpful for use in the classroom, in group counseling and at home: the three Gifted Kids' Survival Guides (Delisle & Galbraith, 1987; Galbraith, 1983, 1984); Giftedness: Living With It and Liking It (Perry, 1987); Gifted Children Speak Out and Gifted Kids Speak Out (Delisle, 1984, 1987) and On Being Gifted (American Association for Gifted Children, 1978). The following are some resources for assisting social adjustment: Self-Esteem, Communication and High Level Thinking Skills: A Facilitator's Handbook (Greenlee, 1992); A Kid's Guide to Making Friends (Wilt, 1980); SAGE: Self-Awareness Growth Experiences, Grades 7-12 (Kehayan, 1983); Awareness and Change (Kline, Kline & Overholt, 1990); Reading Ladders for Human Relations (6th ed.)(Tway, 1981); and The Bookfinder 4: When Kids Need Books (Spredemann-Dreyer, 1989).

Bibliotherapy is an excellent way to help gifted children deal with problems of self-esteem and developing friendships. The Bookfinder (Spredemann-Dreyer, 1989) is useful in locating children's books related to specific issues. In addition, certain children's writers feature gifted children in their books. The following are some recommended authors: Helen Cresswell, Paula Danziger, Constance Greene, Maria Gripe, Virginia Hamilton, Mollie Hunter, E. L. Konigsburg, Joseph Krumgold, Madeleine L'Engle, Ursula LeGuin, Sonia Levitin, Katherine Paterson, K. M. Peyton, Mary Rodgers, Stephanie Tolan and Cynthia Voigt.

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